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Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

Chloë Edwards

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Cosmic Dancers, Cosmetic Shells: Exploring the Queer Potential of London's Blitz in the Early Thatcher Era

Chloë Edwards
University of Exeter

Abstract

This paper concentrates on the ways in which masculinity and male (homo)sexuality were challenged, depicted, and expressed within the New Romantic subculture of Margaret Thatcher's first term (1979-1983). Centring on the subculture's nucleus, the Blitz nightclub in London's Covent Garden, which served as a safe space in which its clientele could explore their identities away from the prevailing Conservative ideology of the time, I examine the work of prominent figures who prompted reflections on attitudes towards mainstream gay visibility and the shift in representations of queerness within popular culture in Thatcher's Britain. Considering the legacy of punk's contradictory attitudes towards non-heterosexual identities and its 'do-it-yourself' ethos with questions of class, this paper questions the intersections of and tensions between identity and consumption under Thatcher. Tracking the rise of the young, arts-oriented demographic of the Blitz and those who facilitated the subculture's move from outside, to inside of the mainstream popular music scene, namely Steve Strange of Visage and Boy George, I offer a queer reading of their output that illustrates the subversive subculture's ability to bring non-heterosexual masculinities into mainstream popular music in early 1980s Britain, concurrently demonstrating that assessments of the subculture as being only aesthetically-oriented are too reductive.

Keywords: music; Margaret Thatcher; queerness

This paper seeks to map a topography of queer masculinities and male sexuality within the New Romantic subculture of Margaret Thatcher's first term in office, a scene that nurtured and encouraged explorations of gender and sexuality in its core London nucleus, the Blitz nightclub. Exploring the rise of two artists associated with the New Romantic movement and their particularly distinctive visual styles, inspired by the

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gender and sexual fluidity and aesthetics of punk and associated club cultures, permits me to sketch an understanding of the changes in musical, social, and urban topographies of masculinity at this point. Following an examination of the Blitz's origins and key proponent, Steve Strange, moving my focus to Culture Club then invites a reflection on the performed masculinity and androgyny of Boy George, media responses to his presentation of gender and more explicitly queer yet ambiguous sexuality, and the transition from the club sphere to the mainstream popular music scene. Additionally, a key aim of the paper is to highlight the coexisting tension between the subversive New Romantic rejection of Conservative attitudes and the aspirational rise to prominence and success of its key figures in line with Thatcherite work ethics and self-making: the striving for success and construction of one's identity, style, and societal positioning through aspiration, ambition, and individualism.

It is necessary to briefly clarify the terminology of the paper and the meanings I assume for certain terms. Though the artists in focus are predominantly gay and bisexual men, *queer* is used throughout as a broader term to indicate signifiers of queerness, which I interpret to represent non-heterosexuality, following the proposed definition offered by Annamarie Jagose (1996, p.1) in *Queer Theory*: a "coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications". Consequently, *queer* is used to refer to these typically marginalised sexualities that may also signify a destabilising, challenging, or troubling of the prevailing heteronormative ideology, in which heterosexuality within a society is privileged, prioritised, or presumed to be universal. Viewing queerness as disruptive is particularly useful here owing to my interest in the ability of gay musicians to use the means of Thatcherite late capitalism to achieve mainstream success in a conservative society. The disruptive potentials of queerness also feed into the contested debates surrounding the notion of queer identities. Certain theorists, such as Lee Edelman, reject the possibility of queerness as an identity one can adopt, believing that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (Edelman, 2004, p.17). I thus seek to interrogate a troubling of prevailing

heteronormativity and the extent to which queer sexualities and representation were brought into mainstream discourse through popular music cultures.

By the time of Thatcher's election in 1979, it had also been over a decade since the Sexual Offences Act 1967 that decriminalised same-sex sexual acts between men in private over the age of twenty-one in England and Wales. The Act excluded Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, and did not extend to the Navy or Armed Forces. An unequal age of consent to heterosexual individuals remained, and though often erroneously referred to as the act that decriminalised male homosexuality, the Act resulted in several visible contradictions that appeared to quash any inferences of homosexual equality. During this period, however, interest in information about gay culture, sexuality, and politics was met by a growth in the gay press and campaign groups, with the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Campaign for Homosexuality (CHE) both pursuing equality for gay individuals. During the early 1980s, Ken Livingstone would lead the Greater London Council, pledging to confront "anti-gay discrimination" (Robinson, 2007, p.144) in a nation headed by the conservatism of Thatcher's government during a decade that witnessed the beginnings of the devastating AIDS epidemic. At the end of the decade, the Section 28 of the Local Government Act was passed, which prevented "promoting homosexuality" (Local Government Act 1988) or its "acceptability" (Local Government Act 1988) in schools, in an attempt to suppress and silence the existence of gay and lesbian individuals.

The New Romantic subculture of the early 1980s can be read as a reaction against the prevailing governing Conservative ideology and its morals, serving as a microcosm for later explorations of gender and sexuality within the decade's popular music. I use New Romanticism to refer to the subculture that spawned from the followers of punk and artists such as David Bowie and Bryan Ferry/Roxy Music, centring on specific clubs. Alongside changing consumer, technological, and lifestyle habits during this period, changes in the visual cultures associated with

popular music consumption and marketing, such as the rise of the music video, MTV, and televisual media, amidst the peak years of postmodernity and its own visual interdisciplinarity, I am interested in the concurrent experimenting with gender binaries and sexual fluidity attached to the New Romantic subculture, and its attempts to break down “conventional theories of class and education” (Strange, c.1982, cited in Ellison, c.1982, p.17). I am therefore interested in its transgression into mainstream popular music of the period, as well as the importance of specific club spaces to the scene, and the significance of these clubs as symbols of changes to the urban sphere. The New Romanticism scene also draws heavily on the work of key artists and subcultures in the previous decade, by challenging portrayals of conservative patriarchal masculinity, and through an increasing reliance on visual culture in the popular music of the time.

My use of masculinity is influenced by those who have written about its complexities and multiple interpretations. Introducing his *Cultures of Masculinity*, Tim Edwards labels masculinity as “at once everywhere and yet nowhere, known and yet unknowable” (Edwards, 2006, p.1), while Richard Dyer has compared it to “air” (Dyer, 1985, p.28) due to its ubiquity in the everyday. Rather than the perhaps more easily defined ‘men’, my understanding of masculinity emphasises its nature as something socially constructed, enacted, and routinely redefined, as opposed to a fixed “category” (Beasley, 2005, pp.174-178) restricted to certain individuals only. Rather than aiming for one homogenous form or definition of masculinity, I consider instead the pluralistic ways in which individuals enact, express, and interpret masculinity. As Jack Halberstam (2018, p.1) outlines, masculinity is not simply synonymous with “maleness” – it is not solely performed by those identifying as male. In this paper, I seek to interrogate depictions of masculinity beyond strict binary iterations and heterosexual identities, aiming to track expressions of masculinity by queer artists who have troubled the notions of both male sexuality and gender conformity. Considering the complexities of ‘hierarchal’ categorises of masculinities that intersect, challenge, and are

dominated by prevailing social and power structures, my definition, which also considers the hegemony of masculinity and intersections with other signifiers of an identity, stems from late twentieth century questioning of masculinity and wider questioning of the role of men in society, undertaken by critics such as R.W. Connell (2020).

I am especially interested in the increased visibility of the performing male body during this period amid an amplified anxiety around masculinity being ‘in crisis’ at this point, a link I deem to be significant and deserving of examination. However, an arguably more constructive perspective of this moment is that of Tim Edwards, whose preference for viewing masculinity instead “*as crisis*” (2006, n.pag) may connote a sense of distress, but is indicative of an ongoing reflective personal response to and construction of gender expression and identity, and one which recognises issues of representation and body image and has no ultimate single set of attributes. Crucially, Edwards notes the impact of changing social and economic factors in contributing to this rethinking of masculinity, as well as concerns that, rather than being a stable and isolated category, it can instead overlap with femininity, which for some may even in itself be troubling, particularly when demonstrated and defined through previously gendered habits, for example, shopping and personal grooming. Considering the discourse surrounding masculinity at this point through this lens suggests a less fixed and passive moment than ‘masculinity in crisis’ may imply, and instead reflects an enduring shift in attitudes and expressions of gender.

Frank Mort’s work on the relationship between masculinity and consumption in the late twentieth century and the creation of specific markets for young men also offers some illumination to my analysis. He notes the importance of gay politics of the 1970s in influencing discussions surrounding identity, masculinity, and gender in subsequent decades, alongside the need for a pluralistic approach that considers the multifaceted masculinities that are marketed, expressed, and lived as opposed to one singular defining masculinity. Moreover, like Edwards, he writes that this must also consider the influences of femininity. Both

Edwards' and Mort's work speak to the specific cultural moment I am examining and, particularly in the case of Mort, situates this analysis within a narrative of changing consumption habits. Viewed in tandem, I adopt an analytical framework that permits an examination of the relationship between consumption and what Mort refers to as "self-reflexivity" (1997, n.pag) that also seeks to dismantle ideas of consumption or personal style and dress that are deemed strictly feminine. In other words, consumption can be viewed as a significant enabler of formulating and universal expression of the self. Buying as a consequence of conscious decision-making regarding personal taste and desire for how we wish to present ourselves, dress, and express our identity thus also adds an element of aspirational self-making to the process. What is soon apparent when analysing 1980s fashion is how it is enmeshed with success and aspirational self-making. Yet this is also frequently coupled with the challenging of gender expectations or norms. To those with access, economic restructuring, changes in technology and consumption, and shifts in representations are permitted an increase in opportunities to redefine and express their own masculinity.

Developments in shopping habits also contributed to strategic alterations to advertising and visual marketing, and the media concept of the New Man. The metropolitan New Man embodied this shift in shopping and consumerism, in an era dominated by concerns about style. Moreover, definitions of masculinity could be challenged by a greater interest in and adoption of previously gendered habits, for example, shopping and personal grooming, and journalists also noted the connection between the increased gay visibility and the reassessing of conventional masculinity in the early 1980s, with *Men's Wear* magazine writer Thom O'Dwyer deliberately choosing a lexis of disclosing sexuality in his 1984 article stating that men's fashion was "coming out of the closets" (O'Dwyer, 1984, cited in Mort, 1997, n.pag). Amidst further shifts in leisure and lifestyle habits, such as the increased attention on fitness and well-being, this scrutinising of masculinities further involved changes to images of the male body. In this context, the male body in advertising

also denoted its sexualisation or objectification as a figure of desire within capitalist consumer culture.

With the ideas of Mort and Edwards in mind, I wish to demonstrate the broader significance of New Romanticism in contributing to a wider discourse regarding changing depictions of masculinity and male sexuality during the early Thatcher years, within a subculture that has frequently been dismissed as lacking substance and being chiefly aesthetically oriented. Indeed, the paper's title is inspired by an analysis of Steve Strange's presentation in a music video that framed him as "only a cosmetic shell" (Adamson and Pavitt, 2011, p.54).

"One man on a lonely platform": Steve Strange & Visage

In paradoxically existing both within and outside of the prevailing Conservative ideology, the Blitz permitted its visitors to disrupt and redefine boundaries and binaries regarding gender and sexuality. British clubs have long been crucial birthplaces for developments in popular music and in nurturing the style or aesthetics of a subculture and community. Clubs have also served as important sites within British gay history amidst the outlawing and discrimination of homosexuality in the everyday. From the 1950s into the 1970s onwards, in large cities such as London, the underground gay subcultures of discreet, members-only clubs dominated by middle-class patronage gradually evolved into a wider range of urban meeting places and social networks in the metropolises that could be based around shared sexual preferences (Weeks, 2018, p.308).

Despite the collapse of the Gay Liberation Front in early 1974 (Feather, 2015, pp.24-25), the move towards gay liberation helped to establish an "extraordinary growth" (Ackroyd, 2018, p.137) of London's club scene. The long-running Bang! (later G-A-Y) began at London's Astoria in 1976 as one of the first gay-oriented club nights, inspired by the discotheques of America, which had permitted people of all sexualities to explore their "ambiguities and curiosities in safety", (*Melody Maker*, 1979, pp. 35-36) and the disco genres that soundtracked these nights that

would evolve into the electronic and Hi-NRG of the 1980s. Furthermore, the popularity of the genre was met with changes in consumption methods, such as the introduction of the 12" single, initially as a promotional product, evident from the release of Donna Summer's 'Love to Love You Baby' in 1975 and its popularity in gay clubs (Haslam, 2015, p.198), which allowed for longer and remixed edits of popular songs to be played. In the case of gay male-oriented spaces in larger cities, for those with access, these new clubs also represented sites in which gay individuals could express and navigate forms of masculinity away from "cultural expectations" (Nardi, 2000, p.8) geared towards essentialist, heteronormative "sexual scripts" (Mutchler, 2000, p.13) in, for example, working men's clubs of industrialised regions across Britain. Gay and other queer-specific venues in particular also permitted public affirmations of such identities through physical claiming of these sites in what Fiona Buckland labels "*embodied* action" (2002, p.3). Moreover, these clubs also symbolised community-specific spaces that nurtured "friendships" and other non-romantic connections and networks of support (Nardi, 2000, p.8), the significance of which was further highlighted during the years of the AIDS crisis.

Alongside sexuality, music came to be a defining element in choice of club. With punk having fractured and dissipated by the late 1970s, key New Romantic figures Rusty Egan and Steve Strange started a Bowie night in 1978 at Billy's nightclub for those desiring a club night dedicated to the music of David Bowie and Roxy Music, before high demand meant relocating to the bigger Blitz club. The Blitz – with its interwar cabaret influences and curious wartime décor featuring "Bovril signs and tin hats" (Blitzed: The 80s Blitz Kids Story, 2021) as well as a blurring of the present moment and obscuring of any effort to place the time period of the present day – also encouraged a continual change in clientele outfits and placed great emphasis on an individual's appearance. This can be viewed as a form of queering of time, following Elizabeth Freeman's definition of queer time as asynchronous and with "no past, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and, crucially, no

history as a distinct people” (2007, p.162). Considering the image of the Blitz as a space for gender and sexuality to be explored, it is therefore unsurprising that this ambiguous space permitted those in the Blitz to construct their own rendering of a future in which they were involved and embodied. Alongside permitting a safe space for explorations of gender and sexuality, unlike punk, which had ripped up “every post-1945 style” (Rimmer, 2003, p.62), stylistically this scene instead opted for a postmodern approach by utilising the “entire history of costume” (Rimmer, 2003, p.62). Indicative of the creative potential of its young arts-oriented clientele, this also encouraged a resourcefulness from a student demographic with little disposable income. The aesthetics of the Blitz culture were therefore a vital part of its world, pedalling an emphasis on unique individualism. Jonathan M. Woodham further notes the alignment of postmodern bricolage, favoured by the New Romantics, with the decade’s emphasis on “the individual, deregulation, and the ‘enterprise culture’” (2011, pp.238-241), as endorsed by the Thatcher government. Unlike the cohesive aesthetics of the Teddy Boy subculture, the lack of uniformity in dress not only encouraged the potential of an individual’s own style and self-expression but demanded less expense when not trying to achieve a set look.

Indeed, as well as music taste, the visual impact and influence of figures such as David Bowie and Roxy Music was highly evident. Egan and Strange’s club nights rejected the formal dress codes still employed by other clubs in the late 1970s, which required suits and ties for its male clientele and banned leather jackets and denim (Haslam, 2015, p.180) – instead they provided guests with the opportunity and challenge of continual self-reinvention and individuality. As well as experimenting with identity and style, the clubs offered the chance to counter the outside difficulties and prospects of the early 1980s for those unemployed, unrepresented, or seeking identification or excitement to fulfil their fantasies. In some respects, it could be argued that this individual ambition embodied a form of aspiration associated with Thatcherism, though we can simultaneously view the attraction of reinvention as a form

of subversion of the pressures and prospects faced by young adults in the early 1980s amidst austere unemployment figures and instability. The new decade continued the economic difficulties of the 1970s, with 5.8% (Office for National Statistics, 2021) of over-16s unemployed at the start of the new decade (a figure that would double by 1984). This economic instability bought with it inflation and a recession, with those in deindustrialised areas such as South Wales, Sunderland, and Coventry particularly affected. With unemployment a destabilising effect on an individual's place in society and purpose, this tension manifested itself in riots across the UK, which were predominantly male-led, and in multiracial cities where racial tensions and discrimination further compounded discontent and frustration. Such unease among young men in particular would be further heightened due to the possibility of conscription into the Falklands War (April-June 1982).

Whilst the full attraction of the New Romantic ethos and free reign to seek pleasure and redefine beauty may only have been accessible to those who could visit the clubs, it is significant that the subculture, and its redefining of gender and sexuality boundaries – and opportunities for exploration unlikely to have been encouraged in other social spaces – which were often met with ambivalence in the press, should be so inherently enmeshed within the popular culture of the 1980s, partly owing to changes in consumption methods. Moreover, the other creative figures and artists at the club outside of music, namely artists Tracey Emin and David Robilliard, also indicate the creative atmosphere nurtured by the Blitz. Internationally, the release of *Cabaret* in 1972, set in a Weimar-era Berlin club, featured a title track that asked “what good is sitting alone in your room?/come hear the music play/life is a cabaret...” (Minnelli, 1972) and served as another influence on the subculture. The European influence of West Berlin in the music played at the Blitz continued through the release of Bowie's Berlin albums, especially the experimental *Low* (1977) which drew heavily on German electronic groups such as Kraftwerk. ‘Nightclubbing’ by Iggy Pop, was recorded in Berlin and produced by Bowie, and appeared on the Blitz

playlists (Rimmer, 2003, p.96), undoubtedly aided by lyrics stating that “*we’re* what’s happening” (Pop, 1972).

Soon forming Visage, with, among others, Midge Ure (more widely associated with Ultravox), the group recorded music tailored to the atmosphere and taste of the Blitz clientele. Through the popularity of Visage’s music and dissemination of the group’s visual culture, this permitted early New Romantic aesthetics and concurrent visual dismantling of gender tropes through dress (abstract make-up, hair, and contouring of the face, paired with layered garments in unexpected fabrics and cuts) to be broadcast. The group’s cigarette-based single ‘Tar’ attracted little attention, though second single ‘Fade to Grey’ was enormously aided by Strange’s appearance two months prior in David Bowie’s ‘Ashes to Ashes’ video, with its saturated and inverted colour palette. ‘Ashes to Ashes’ featured on the 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* together with ‘Fashion’. Dave Rimmer (2003, p.26) reads the focus of the lyrics of ‘Fashion’ as a scornful insight into Bowie’s contempt for the New Romantics’ apparent continuation of his work, branding it “loud and it’s tasteless and I’ve heard it before” (Bowie, 1980). That Bowie wore his Pierrot clown costume for the video featuring figures from the scene may further hint at a sly mocking of the subculture. Ironically, ‘Fashion’ became a popular choice at the Blitz.

Steve Strange’s fashion tastes and weekly reinventions illustrated the multiplicities of styles and influences drawn upon by those pedalling the subculture movement, aided by the influences of surrounding individuals, and, similarly to punk and SEX, specific outlets such as designer Willy Brown’s Modern Classics, in another example of an initial emphasis on ‘do-it-yourself’ trends moving into the commercial sector. Strange’s outfits were chameleonic, drawing on countless subcultures, trends, and styles from throughout history. Moreover, this can be used to ascertain the transgression such pieces have made to retrospectively signify popular culture and fashion of the period. In one image of Strange at the Blitz, he is wearing a grey and maroon Willy Brown jumpsuit. A similar Willy Brown piece, featuring the same pointed collar, cinched

waist, trimmed breast pocket, and contrasting colour schemes with metal buttons running down the front was displayed in 2013 at the V&A's *The 1980s: From Club to Catwalk* exhibition. From the sites in which both jumpsuits are based, they demonstrate the evolution of the styles of an underground subculture increasingly entering mainstream fashion and retrospective perceptions of popular fashion during the 1980s, which, crucially in the example of the two jumpsuits, stems from a queering of mainstream club fashion.

The music video for Visage's 'Fade to Grey' would also help to further disseminate the Blitz's aesthetics beyond the club itself. With its pulsing electronics and the French duelling of the lyrics, the song originated from Visage's tour with Gary Numan, though the video – relatively simple, emphasising frequent close-ups of Strange and Julia Fodor – allowed the Blitz image to be disseminated globally, as Midge Ure (cited in Jones, 2020, pp.205-206) explained:

All of a sudden, we had moved from looking at fashion, style, current fads... the Godley and Creme video that accompanied 'Fade to Grey' was just as important as the song because it presented the look, it presented something other-worldly, and it sent that look all across Europe, right round the world.

Aware of the potentials of the music video concept, in the accompanying video to 'Fade to Grey' – with Strange and Fodor equally made-up with painted nails, slicked back hair, red lipstick, pale ivory faces and, for Strange, purple blusher – gender is almost completely removed between the central figures, with no divisions between either Fodor or Strange's appearance. In a sequence lasting less than ten seconds, we see a profile of Fodor's face fade into a frontal shot of Strange with the silhouette of Fodor marked in white on Strange's face. By the end of the video, Strange appears in the same painted white face and red lips Fodor wore in her earlier sequences.

Lyrically focusing on "one man on a lonely platform" (Visage, 1980), 'Fade to Grey' sits halfway through the album *Visage* and its themes of troubled men and disorientation. These themes would be continued on Visage's second record, *The Anvil* (1982), particularly

evident on 'The Damned Don't Cry'. The debut album, which seemingly addressed a crisis of masculinity, did so through visuals that attempted to dismantle conventions of gender, while also using the new synthesiser sounds. Unlike typically gendered instruments such as guitars in progressive rock, the synthesiser arguably demands less from the physical performer, and – particularly in the case of the early experimental synthesiser tracks – contributes to an othering of the artist owing to its apparent artificiality and detachment.

Though dismissed as “simply surface” (Savage, 1981), for Visage, who Strange dubbed “the first video stars” (cited in Sullivan, 1981) their visual culture and harnessing of the format allowed the New Romantic aesthetics to travel beyond a few clubs in London. Fronted by a bisexual vocalist from a small town in South Wales, reinventing himself weekly in interviews, television appearances, and club nights and playing with conventions of masculine fashion, these videos allowed other outsiders with similar origins to connect and identify with the subculture beyond the club circuit of its origins. Moreover, it allowed for the dissemination of a particular cultural practice, which quickly exploited the potential of a particularly postmodern “interdisciplinary crossover” through the enmeshing of visual culture with performed music (Adamson and Pavitt, 2011, p.50). In recognising and using this potential with a rapidly expanding visually oriented mass media, Visage consequently drove such marginalised gender presentations and sexualities into the mainstream, a practice that would be repeated and itself remodelled by fellow Blitz alumni.

“Stranger In This World”: Boy George, Mainstream Androgyne

George O'Dowd was a regular patron of the Blitz and the club's sometime cloakroom assistant before accusations of pickpocketing terminated his employment. Raised in London in an Irish Catholic family as one of six children, he left school at fifteen and worked in various jobs before beginning the 1980s living with other Blitz clientele in assorted squats

near the venue. Away from home, this lifestyle, with its queer subcultural nucleus, afforded an opportunity for a redefinition of adolescence and adulthood outside of the constraints of a suburban heteronormative upbringing. Additionally, the Blitz symbolised a rejection of the Conservative Party's underlying domestic-oriented series of objectives, taking aim at supposedly key issues for the electorate – education, inflation, and housing – which centred around the heterosexual family unit. Existing outside of a lifestyle defined by institutions of “family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” and conventional forms of housing and employment, the Blitz nurtured a queer form of subcultural kinship stemming from “transient, extrafamilial and oppositional modes of affiliation” (Halberstam, 2006, pp.3-26). O'Dowd embodied this atmosphere of the Blitz, and, soon appearing in early issues of *i-D* in a nun's habit and more bricolage outfits consisting of artefacts from his dad's building site and t-shirts from McLaren and Westwood's Seditious (i-D, January 1981, n.pag), as Boy George, and frontman of Culture Club, he would become one of British popular music's most observed figures in the media, owing to his individual style, androgynous appearance, and ambiguous sexuality. Boy George has also become synonymous with the progression of the New Romantic subculture towards the centre of British popular culture during the early Thatcher years as lead singer of Culture Club.

Initially rising to prominence between the overtly politically vocal Tom Robinson and Jimmy Somerville, Boy George's androgyny and ambiguity regarding his sexuality garnered seemingly endless press attention. The early years of his career were recorded through innumerable interviews, both domestically and internationally, earning the scrutiny of British tabloids and scepticism of seemingly more liberal yet intrigued journalists and presenters. He was routinely questioned about his gender, reasons for choosing his outfits, and – particularly in the tabloids – unashamedly asked about his sexuality as an apparent invited consequence for his appearance. As surmised by Janice Miller in *Fashion Cultures Revisited* (2013, pp.341-351), “it seems... in the popular

imagination at least, that when men wear makeup they adopt femininity and that such... practices must in turn signal something about sexual identity”. This attitude further highlights both the fragility surrounding ideas of masculinity and male sexuality and factors used to make assumptions about such characteristics, as well as echoing how gay men in particular have historically been “penalised” for not fulfilling the “criteria of masculinity” (Carrigan, Lee, and Connell, 2018, n.pag). Moreover, as illustrated in a 1984 *Daily Mirror* article, we can observe the pathologizing of the singer’s sexuality and identity, as the journalist interviews a psychologist and researcher to explain Boy George’s choice to dress androgynously, offering the conclusion that “he appears to have no sexual problems” (Proops, 1984, pp.16-17). Illustrative of the tabloid media’s climate towards non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming individuals at that time, such articles further imply a probable reluctance on Boy George’s behalf to discuss his sexuality and gender. A consequence of his hesitancy to directly answer such personal questions, however – partly owing to the reservations of his manager, record company, and other members of Culture Club (cited in Kirk, 1999, p.1) – subsequently led to a constructed asexual public persona, as well as being “criticised” for not using his position to advocate for gay issues and representation by contemporary group Bronski Beat (Rimmer, 2011, p.146). In addition, this framing of Boy George as a desexualised figure loved by “children and grannies alike” (Driscoll, 1983, p.9) echoes the trope of the innocuous ‘good homosexual’.

Furthermore, quotes regarding his personal life in the press could be lifted out of context to fit this image; the infamous headline “*Sex? I’d rather have a nice cup of tea – says Boy George*” (Ferrari, 1983, p.11) was drawn from an article in which the singer had stated he preferred developing long-term relationships over conversations and tea as opposed to casual encounters. As a frequent topic in the early years of Culture Club, between approximately 1982 and 1985 – “for once and for all, are you gay?” (Powell, 1982) – Boy George’s interview responses regarding his sexuality could often be contradictory, indicating bi – or pansexuality,

but he was also careful to defensively clarify that he “was not that sort of queer” or “camp in a gay sense” (Morley, 1982). His conflicting language when being frank about his own non-heterosexuality at times verged on being problematic, though seemingly also at times playing with essentialist expectations and stereotypes, and while not always entirely convincing, certainly disputes his claim in Culture Club’s 1983 single ‘Karma Chameleon’ that “I’m a man, who doesn’t know/how to sell a contradiction” (Culture Club, 1983b). Yet such probing questions from the media may also have been too precarious to answer owing to the relationship between Boy George and Culture Club drummer Jon Moss, which was not then public knowledge, and which was described by Boy George as “the creative force behind Culture Club” (George, 1995, p.199), and the inspiration for some of the group’s most significant songs, including 1982’s ‘Do You Really Want to Hurt Me’.

It is the early work of Boy George’s career that is significant here, owing to the immediacy of the media response to the arrival of the group and their imagery, and indeed, due to the further dissemination of the New Romantic subculture to the masses and the closer attention paid towards masculinity at this point. As well as influencing his navigation of his sexuality as a performing musician, the likes of David Bowie and glam rock figures also undoubtedly inspired Boy George’s early preference for androgynous and gender nonconforming dress. Yet Boy George’s rise in prominence situated him among a broader contemporary landscape of artists who also combined music and fashion with male sexuality, not least within the New Romantic scene. Indeed, though the relationship between popular music and fashion is as deep-rooted and enduring as the emergence of popular music itself, we can infer the increased visibility and scrutiny of male artists and their sexuality, together with their styles of dress, as part of the broader tapestry of the negotiation of our understandings of masculinity/femininity and heterosexuality/homosexuality amidst the perceived instability of such categories in the later twentieth century and increasingly publicly “scrutinised” view of the male body (Deslandes, 2021, n.pag). Moreover,

the 1970s and 1980s saw a rise in male artists combining expressions of queer sexuality with increasingly elaborate means of dress, costume, and presentation of the self. For Boy George, however, his style can be interpreted as reflective of an arguably queerer, more subversive self-expression that challenged the dominant binary trope of gendered fashion and fixed categories of sexuality. Especially in the early 1980s, his style evoked the fluidity of New Romanticism and spoke to a growing trend in British fashion during the decade that sought to challenge restrictions on male and female styles, shapes, and silhouettes.

Whereas other New Romantic artists such as Spandau Ballet had aimed for visual imagery that aligned themselves with renewed iterations of masculinity rooted in beauty and youthfulness, Boy George pushed further at the confines of the gender binary by opting for a gender expression altogether less rooted in a male/female divide. His arguably most recognisable look, as he appeared in the 1983 music video for 'Karma Chameleon', illustrates the various elements of a typical look of his during the early Culture Club years. His long, dark hair is plaited with ribbons and other fabrics, his made-up face features red lipstick, bright eyeshadow and shaped eyebrows, and he wears layered, patterned garments that play with the expected fit and tailoring of men's fashion. He also wears a black fedora, typically associated with the Hasidic Jewish male community.

Rebecca Arnold (2001, p.111) notes that as "masculinity is held up as a signal of the "norm" in western culture, any deviation from conventional male attire is viewed with great unease", which can be seen in the rich media coverage evoked by the popularity and visibility of Boy George. Furthermore, the fragility of an assumed universal masculinity infers an understanding of masculinity that exists only as the direct negation of femininity, and that any shift from the conventions of masculinity serves to trouble its existence, rather than redefine or expand its interpretations. In other words, the rigidity of the conventions of gender within mainstream public discourse during the early 1980s indicates a lack of space for individual rewritings of gender identity and

expression and the assumed fragility underpinning these narratives. It is also worth positing the argument that such scrutiny of Boy George permits normative behaviour to construct itself against perceptions of non-normative behaviour, and consequently relies on such performances to define itself as oppositional. The coining of the 'gender bender' term in the media, typically used in the tabloid press to refer to the likes of Boy George, Marilyn, and Dead or Alive's Pete Burns, as well as Eurythmics' Annie Lennox, illustrates an othering of these artists owing to their androgynous presentation of themselves, as seen through a 1983 *Daily Mail* article about the prominence of androgyny in the contemporary pop music landscape headlined: "the gender benders... let loose on the pop charts" (Kinnersly and Petty, 1983, p.6).

Elsewhere, the writer Jan Morris thoughtfully articulated the focus on androgynous and non-binary people in an article for *Vanity Fair* as well as a predicted shift in the overall fluidity of gender away from the rigidity of binary definitions. She observes, in a refreshing variation from contemporary tabloid reports, a perspective that errs towards the understanding of the performed and constructed nature of gender and its complexities. For example, she states that "masculine and feminine are not the inalienable prerogatives of male and female" (Morris, 1984) and that the "dazed, wondering, but strangely affectionate response" evoked towards figures such as Boy George is the beginning of a "treaty" that encourages the myriad interpretations of masculinity to coexist, rather than serve to oppose and further divide one another (Morris, 1984). The coverage of Boy George, and the various opinions presented in a range of publications, serve to highlight the discourse surrounding the prominence of androgyny and ambiguous gender presentations within popular culture during the 1980s.

Prior to the dissemination of Culture Club's music videos, the audio-only broadcast of the group's music resulted in erroneous assumptions that their vocalist was female. Once he was known – particularly internationally in America – Boy George leaned into the "eccentricity" (cited in Robinson, 1984, p.7) of Britain as a catalyst for his

particular style, emphasising the group's nationality as a means of marketing the group to a foreign audience and his own appeal to a non-domestic market. In a 1984 *Daily Mail* article, he explained that "England is like a laboratory for ideas. England allows more experimentation than America [...] also, the English culture is based more on eccentricity [...] our culture goes deep" (cited in Robinson, 1984, p.7). This was not only an attempt to ground the group as part of a historicised British culture, but for Boy George in particular, it meant that his non-normative masculinity could also be inferred as pertaining to "a particular white, British identity that was in itself queer from a US perspective" (Hawkins, 2016, p.47).

Domestically, discourse in public letters in the press during Culture Club's peak were divided on Boy George's influence on listeners and audiences, particularly upon children, highlighting a tension between parental concern and the popularity of Boy George and Culture Club among young listeners. In response to his appearance on the cover of the *Daily Mail's You* magazine, one reader wrote to express her objection to his appearance because she did not think that "the average mother and wife would be interested to read about such an immoral person" (Champion, c.1983, n.pag). Such views echo the recurring media and political discourse surrounding the apparent threat of LGBTQ+ people to children, amidst the renewed "moral conservatism" brought about by the Thatcher government (Dockray and Sutton, 2017, p.156) and its core image of the family as defined in a hetero-centric, Victorian way. Of course, a defining illustration of the government's anxiety about the visibility of non-heterosexuality came in the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988. Yet this discourse failed to lessen the popularity of Culture Club among younger audiences. Moreover, the release of related merchandise such as the 1984 Boy George doll (complete with four outfits), and the publication of the *Boy George: Fashion and Make-Up Book* illustrates the exploitation of the youth consumer market within popular music, in addition to how Boy George's image was itself commercialised and sold.

Additionally, Boy George's role can be seen in disseminating the New Romantic subculture to the mainstream as part of a broader trend wherein "clubs morphed into catwalks" in the 1980s (Stanfill, 2013, p.9). By the middle of the decade, a rise in androgynous fashion in both high fashion such as the work of Jean Paul Gaultier and reports on changing popularity in women's suits referred to the prominence of the likes of Boy George and Marilyn in influencing a demand that moved beyond conventionally gendered pieces and forms. Consequently, as well as disseminating Blitz culture to the mainstream, the androgyny of Boy George can be situated within a wider discourse and trend towards more androgynous and less strictly gendered fashion within the everyday and high fashion trends of 1980s Britain. While Spandau Ballet demonstrated a growth in the male beauty and lifestyle industry and relevant advertising within the media during the 1980s, Boy George's impact sits within a broader dismantling of strictly engendered fashion and a queerer approach to redefining beauty through fashion.

Boy George appeared in a Sue Clowes-inspired close-up shot on the cover of the group's debut album, *Kissing to Be Clever*, in 1982. The record, like Spandau Ballet's early releases, exhibits influences of soul music as well as reggae elements, perhaps most audible on the record's most successful and vulnerable single, 'Do You Really Want to Hurt Me'. The emotional vulnerability of the song, particularly given its personal inspiration, brings into popular consumption an articulation of queer vulnerability that refuses to be silenced, that is both "perilous" in its rawness and "enabling" as a catalyst in resisting song origins drawn chiefly from heterosexual experiences and encounters (Butler, Gambretti, and Sabsay, 2016, p.1). The sudden success of the song resulted in the band's first *Top of the Pops* appearance – which broadcast Boy George's androgynous image to mass audiences, prompting some to misgender him – it spent three weeks at number one in the UK. The structure of the video plays with the linearity of time, in a narrative that begins with Boy George appearing in court for an unknown reason, before cutting to a 1936 nightclub, then a 1957 Soho health club. Lastly, we see Boy George

alone in a prison cell, before being released and reunited with his band, clad in Sue Clowes's designs, with Boy George's top featuring a "wrongly translated" Hebrew version of 'Culture Club' (Hawkins, 2016, p.47). As noted in previous studies of Boy George, it is seemingly "not entirely" coincidental that the final refrain of the song, about Moss and Boy George's relationship, is vocally delivered in Moss's direction, who appears foregrounded and unknowing (Hawkins, 2016, p.46). It is also significant that the relationship inspired a song that avoids typically hetero-centric, male-dominated genre conventions, such as rock. Instead, the song's adoption of reggae and soul elements can be labelled an example of what Dick Hebdige (1987, p.213) refers to as "transfigured musical languages". In (re)discovering marginalised genres, such as funk and R&B, this period – building on foundations laid by punk – saw their evolution and "invention" into new or updated genres, such as synth-pop and reggae (Hebdige, 1987, p.213). In the case of 'Do You Really Want to Hurt Me', with its slow soul-influenced opening and backing vocals, leading to a percussive reggae tempo marked by the use of drums and guitars, the song disseminated less prevailing and dominant musical forms to the mainstream. Accompanying this, Hebdige notes, was the use of marginalised music to articulate marginalised sexualities, or those that were less "phallogentric" or beyond "heterosexual structures of desire" (Hebdige, 1987, p.213).

The launch of MTV the year prior to the release of the 'Do You Really Want to Hurt Me' music video further helped to publicise the band, though the video's distasteful inclusion of blackface meant that MTV were initially uncertain about using it. Opening in a courtroom with Boy George on trial, has him singing with three female backing vocalists behind. Surprisingly, the backing vocalists are women of colour, and the nearby jury comprises of men in blackface. The video for the group's subsequent single, 'Time (Clock of the Heart)' features the band members watching themselves individually close-up on television, which can be interpreted as a comment on the rise in popular music's visual culture during the 1980s and its role in constructing and sharing celebrity

personae. By appearing on television, writes Sasha Geffen, Culture Club and its members were made “real, transmitted, amplified” (2020, p.200). The group built on this theme in their video for ‘It’s a Miracle’ the following year, featuring a fictional board game and clips of other videos, certification plaques, and various headlines about the group’s members. The video features the self-mythologising of a young, popular male group and the signifiers of aspiration, success, and media attention in portraying a narrative of self-making that connects with a Thatcherite work ethic.

Culture Club’s popularity would rise with the release of sophomore album *Colour by Numbers* in 1983, with its single ‘Karma Chameleon’ becoming the biggest-selling song of the year (Copsey, 2021). The lead track from the album, however, ‘Church of the Poison Mind’, marked a development in the band’s direction regarding their sound. Despite the song’s upbeat pace, it can be interpreted as a comment on institutional prejudice, with its lyrics stating that “love is hard to find/in the church of the poison mind” (Culture Club, 1983a). Fifty years on from the Stonewall riots, ‘Church of the Poison Mind’ was included in Pitchfork’s list of ‘50 Songs That Define the Last 50 Years of LGBTQ+ Pride’, citing its call to “embrace love, whatever form it takes” in the face of hostile ideology (Skolnik, 2018). Through an arguably subtle and covert message, the track’s celebratory ethos directly contrasts the emotionality of ‘Do You Really Want to Hurt Me’ and *Colour by Numbers*’ ‘Victims’. Collectively, the first two albums offer variously coded articulations of queer sexuality and romantic experiences, and their commercial success enabled such perspectives to receive airplay and media coverage that disseminated a non-heteronormative male narrative to mass audiences.

Beyond the initial mainstream peak of New Romanticism and the Blitz scene, Boy George would later frequent London club Taboo in the mid-1980s. Founded by Australian designer and performance artist Leigh Bowery, the club would further encourage sexual fluidity and experimentation, and the club’s story was later intertwined with that of Boy George’s rise to fame in the musical *Taboo*, which premiered in 2002

and for which he would also contribute the music, including the song “Stranger in This World”. By the late 1980s, Boy George was speaking frankly about his earlier relationship with the media and the interest in his sexuality, stating that he felt “mentally closeted” earlier (cited in Kirk, 1999, p.242). In 1987, again speaking to Kris Kirk for *Gay Times*, Boy George remained critical of gay liberation, stating that it “it doesn’t mean anything” (1999, p.252). Though disavowing a more politicised advocacy, in response to the passing of Section 28 in 1988, as well as tabloid dissection and disapproval of gay lives and rights, and likely owing to his own experiences, he released his “first openly gay song” (George, 1995, p.529), the call to protest ‘No Clause 28’.

Conclusion

In 1987 in *Gay Times*, Boy George spoke more openly about his sexuality than in any preceding interview, reflecting that though his earlier public discussions had been ambiguous, he felt his gay sexuality had been inferred through “visual statements” (cited in Kirk, 1999, p.241). This paper has sought to consider the early 1980s New Romantic subculture’s role in facilitating a transgression of redefined expressions and performances of queer masculinities and male sexualities through such signifiers, additionally referring to contemporary media discourse, fashion, and new visual media, such as the music video, as a subculture heavily reliant on its aesthetics, which can be read as grounded in postmodern attitudes to interdisciplinarity. Moreover, I aimed to expose the conflation of Thatcherism and the subculture and its emphasis on self-making and aspirationalism.

Tracing the origins of New Romanticism, its popularity, and transgression of the mainstream, beginning with Visage, allowed me to discover the queer origins of the club and its role in the fundamental postmodern genesis of the subculture. As a gay and overtly androgynous figure, whose sexuality remained ambiguous in his early career, the media response to Boy George indicates the treatment of non-heterosexual and

gender nonconforming individuals in the early Thatcher years. Unlike explicitly gay and political artists, Boy George also navigated such intense media interest while also contributing to wider discussions surrounding gender binaries and expectations. Using marginalised genres in his work with Culture Club to articulate non-heterosexual experiences is further illuminative of the subversive impact of New Romantic artists within mainstream British popular music during the Thatcher era.

As discussed in the paper's introduction, both during its existence and retrospectively, in the mainstream media and music press, the subculture has been categorised as lacking conviction (Bohn, 1981), being essentially apolitical (Maconie, 2013), and encouraging a sense of narcissism among its followers (Williams, 1980). I argue that such criticisms are too reductive, overlooking the nuances and paradoxes that existed in New Romanticism in early 1980s Britain, as a subculture more subversive than is often recognised. With its nucleus in the redeveloping capital of Thatcher's Britain, New Romanticism offered a vital space for both kinship and creative experimentation with both gender boundaries and binary ideas of sexuality during a premiership crafted around conservatism and Victorian family values, as lifestyle and leisure sectors became increasingly commodified and capitalised on renewed attention to masculinity and its iterations. The subculture's peak during the early Thatcher era amidst shifts in contemporary discourse and popular culture surrounding masculinity was also accompanied by Britain's own altered post-war global position and increasingly fractured character, opening up a broader analysis of further depictions and iterations of non-heterosexual masculinities and gay male sexualities in 1980s Britain, into the effects of the AIDS crisis and the enactment of Section 28 later in the decade.

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